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ENDING THE "GOSSIP" COLUMN HEADACHE

By

J. W. BEATTIE

President, The Columbia Scholastic Press Advisers Ass'n.
Adviser, MIRROR, S.S. Palmer High, Palmerton, Pa.

"COPY-CAT"

The snow is lying very deep.
My house is sheltered from the blast.
I hear each muffled step outside.
I hear each voice go past.

But I'll not venture in the drift.
Out of this bright security,
Till enough footsteps come and go
To make a path for me.

"Convention" by Agnes Lee

As abundant evidence in every field of human endeavor can most certainly show, a majority of men in all ages of world history has found it easier to follow the lead of others than to blaze new trails. In many cases this trend cannot be called blameworthy; in fact, there are instances when it may be commendable. This is certainly not true, however, in the field of writing where originality of style is the chief stock-in-trade of the creative artist. Only the most capable ever reach the top, and the best an imitator can hope to gain is reflected fame, transitory remembrance because his style is so similar to that of a master craftsman. Supreme compliment to the ability of any writer is the desire of many others to copy his achievements.

A tendency toward emulation is by no means confined to professionals, of course. Reams of copy adapted to a particular locality but patterned after some famous original are contributed daily by novices in every town from Pumpkin Hollow to New

York. In every section of the country, too, will be found high school publications in which featured columns are devoted to the most popular aspects of some nationally-known prototype.

Obviously a school publication can not improve if it follows the same models year after year. A column that was brilliantly successful as conducted by Johnny Jones last year may be a dismal failure under Dick Smith this year. Yet some will contend such a feature must be continued because "that's what the kids want". Particularly is this true if Johnny and Dick are continuing the so-called "gossip" or "scandal" column, a feature which is almost invariably a direct steal from the worst aspects of one or another of the better-known syndicated columns without the clever or witty style which characterized the original.

And even if the high school writer should be both clever and witty in his own right, what is the real contribution of the column to the paper? Those who favor "gossip" believe that names of more

students get into the paper through this medium. This argument could no doubt be disproved by actual statistics, but let one of the columnists speak for himself:

"Why do some people complain about the same crowd always being in this column? Turn in the information, kids, and we'll put it in."

Others advance the theory that the gossip increases sales of the paper. Whether or not this is true is open to some question, for relatively few staffs will make any effort to judge results by publishing several issues without the gossip.

However, any paper which must depend on a single column to guarantee sales must lack appeal on more than three pages. If this is true, if the publication has no better reason for existence, the staff should suspend its activities. If, on the contrary, other material in the paper is truly worth while, then few prospective purchasers will be deterred by omission of a single feature, no matter how attractive that feature might have been.

Solution of the problems raised by these two objections must depend, naturally, upon the school itself. But if a greater number of names is what is really desired, information about the varied activities of many pupils, in class and out, can be secured by contacting homeroom and classroom teachers. Real news rather than fabricated romances or biting sarcasm can thus become the policy of the publication.

Further, changing to a policy of semester or yearly subscriptions may end the sales problem by guaranteeing a fixed income from circulation and freeing the staff from fear of a deficit for any particular issue. Should this change be impractical, then a "Publication Day Scandal Session" in the school assembly room may get desired results. Admission to the assembly would be secured by the purchase of a copy of the paper, and the chief purpose of the meeting would be oral presentation of those tidbits of gossip which were deleted from the paper. Such a session would serve a dual purpose in that it would remove offending material from the paper and it would prevent most of the ill-will frequently engendered by printed remarks.

Some editors sincerely believe that no one is ever really offended or hurt by what is said about him in the school publication. In certain schools this may be true, but no such belief can be accepted as a general truth, for regardless of the care exercised in compiling the column, some one is bound to react adversely. Unfortunately, the feature is too frequently used for revenge items, and in a unit as small as a school, no columnist can continue for long when in every issue his material insults a few pupils. Many staff members show little regard for the reactions of those whose names appear in their candid comment columns, and yet consideration of the feelings of the pupil alone would be sufficient justification for killing the scandal column in any school publication. But much more remains to be taken into account. The paper goes to teachers, to parents, to friends, and to other schools, most of whom have a direct interest in the school which the paper represents. Some items, therefore, can do more than insult a pupil. Many are potential sources of irreparable damage to the reputation and good name of guiltless people. Danger lurks in numberless innocently-intended paragraphs, such as:

"H---- M-----'s exam grades have improved considerably since he learned how to decorate his shirt cuffs."

"J---- B----- has been caught two - timing Nellie again. Claims it's hereditary."

Those in charge of the paper can only hope that parents are in good humor when these and similar supposed witticisms are brought to their attention, for the school publication is just as liable to suit as any other paper.

Then, too, there are items which will lead outsiders to wonder about the organization from which comes a statement like this:

"A rumor is being spread that certain of the 'old fogies' are going to retire from teaching at the end of the present school term. It's about time."

Thinking people will immediately realize that the comment probably emanates from a student annoyed by the disapproval of one of the "old fogies". Yet if this

unsubstantiated criticism about a few teachers is used once, it will probably be used again about others. Paragraphs of this nature tend to convey the idea that students fool and show little respect for members of the faculty, an impression which reflects no credit on the school. Nor will interested readers find anything praiseworthy in the discovery that, according to the student columnists, the major apparent interest of a great many pupils is the progress of the pseudo-romances found in the corridors.

Editors have protested frequently that the scandal column is just one small phase of the paper's activities, only to insist in the next breath that without the column the publication would be unable to continue. When the argument is broken down, they fall back on the familiar defensive chant, "Well, other papers have gossip columns, and our readers demand one too." It is, obviously, the ancient concept of "Keeping up with the Joneses" in a new setting. No originality of ideas, nothing really new in the way of treatment---simply a copy of what has been found in other papers.

Such a column can never become a positive force in the printed Voice of the School, and if the publication shows an infantile interest in a hundred variations of "John at Mary's locker", other features in the paper will be regarded as similarly childish. Such a situation is unfortunate since none of the readers can overlook the very obvious fact that the paper is expected to be representative of the school.

Some there are who will dispute the suggestion that the scandal column is copied. They will argue that the material under consideration is wholly the work of a staff member, but what is the difference, essentially, between this typical professional example:

"Howard Hughes and Lana Turner are hotter than last week's temperature... Wonder if it is true Joan Crawford and John Emery have discovered each other?"

And this note selected from a student - compiled column:

"Oh, look, There's C----- M----- making love to J----- D-----.....and G----- R-----still wolfing A----- D-----."

Or between:

"Snapshot: Lynn Carver, recently divorced from Nicky Nayfack, dining at the bandbox with Lynne Jackson."

and

"The recently-elected cheerleader separated from her steady, only to find a date for the Junior Prom waiting for her with her fellow associate, another cheerleader. How's that for good work?"

Examples could be multiplied over and over again, and most of them would be equally commonplace. But all lead to one conclusion: Like outstanding columnists and feature writers, a really good school publication must develop its own style, its own features. It may not imitate the work of others, professional or amateur. There is no space in any school publication now filled with a gossip column which could not be filled with more important, more impressive, more distinctively original material.

Try it!

* C. S. P. A. A. N O T E S ! *

.....The War Production Board is counting on the cooperation of the school press in the scrap drive. Here is a real chance to show the power of student publications! A recent letter addressed to the President of the CSPAA and signed by Stephen E. Fitzgerald, Director of Information of the War Production Board, said in part:

"I want to express Mr. Nelson's appreciation for your interest in this matter and his conviction that there is a great deal that school newspapers and magazines can do to further the war effort through the scrap campaign."

.....Plans for the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association are already underway. The meeting will take place at Columbia University on March 11-12-13, 1943! EVERYBODY will be there ! Will YOU ?

TO BE UP TO THE MINUTE ON WHAT
IS HAPPENING IN THE SCHOOL PRESS FIELD
ATTEND THESE
THREE IMPORTANT WARTIME CONFERENCES!

OCT. 24 COLUMBIA SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASS'N. AND THE PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL PRESS ASS'N.
W A R T I M E C O N F E R E N C E

To Be Held at the Drexel Institute of Technology, Philadelphia, Penna.

Discussing: THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PRESS IN WARTIME

Speakers : Dr. Joseph M. Murphy, Director of the C S P A, and Educational Consultant for the Civil Aeronautics Administration on the Air-Age Program.

Program * Sectional Meetings--Panel Discussions with Publication Experts and Professional Writers.
* Senior and Junior High School Newspaper, Magazine and Yearbook Meetings.

Conference Begins at 10:00 A.M.

OCT. 31 COLUMBIA SCHOLASTIC PRESS ADVISERS ASSOCIATION
F O U R T H A N N U A L A U T U M N C O N F E R E N C E

To Be Held at Columbia University, New York City, New York

Discussing: GETTING DOWN TO BRASS TACKS ON THE PRESENT SCHOOL PRESS SITUATION!

Speakers : Mr. A. A. Lubersky, S. K. Smith Company, Chicago, Illinois
Mr. Charles F. Troxell, Frankford High School, Philadelphia, Pa.
Dr. Joseph M. Murphy, Director of the C S P A

Program * Technical Clinics for Newspapers--Magazines--Duplicated Publications.
* Luncheon--Advisers will be joined by the student editors attending the Yearbook Conference for Luncheon at the Men's Faculty Club. This is a departure from previous years because of dining difficulties on Morningside Heights. An after-Luncheon speaker is to be announced.

Conference Begins at 10:00 A.M.

McMillin Academic Theater

OCT. 31 COLUMBIA SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASSOCIATION YEARBOOK CONFERENCE
A O N E - D A Y C O U R S E I N Y E A R B O O K P R O D U C T I O N
To Be Held at Columbia University, New York City, New York

Discussing: THE YEARBOOK PROBLEM IN WARTIME

Speakers : DeWitt D. Wise, Chairman, C S P A Yearbook Division, presiding.
A. A. Luborsky, nationally known yearbook authority.

Program * Opening Meeting held jointly with the Advisers Association (See above)
* How planning and organizing make for better and less expensive books; how an organized staff, regardless of size, can do a better job than an unorganized staff. The logical method of writing specifications for photography and engraving and how to get the most from them. Printing specifications that work; covers that improve your book.

BE SURE AND BRING A COPY OF YOUR YEARBOOK WITH YOU. TIME PROVIDED FOR QUESTIONS.

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